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ABSTRACT

The effectiveness of a two-day workshop on job-searching skills and interview techniques for students graduating from a college of liberal arts was evaluated. The training program was designed and implemented at the University of Lowell with a pilot group of liberal arts graduates in spring 1983. Students learned to prepare a professional resume, cover letter, and followup letter. Individual and group discussions of participants' resumes and cover letters were conducted. Materials were distributed to students on the topics of resumes and correspondence, job listings, and interviews. Students also developed resumes and cover letters for five actual jobs. In addition, students were helped to recognize their skills and talents that were relevant to job performance. To help improve students' interviewing skills and appearance, simulations and videotaping were used. Followup interviews demonstrated that students can be trained in job-searching skills in a relatively short time period and that such workshops are helpful to finding employment. Responses to followup interviews from three participants are provided that cover background employment information, search processes and strategies, and overall program evaluation. (Author/SW)

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IMPROVING JOB SEEKING SKILLS: A TRAINING PROGRAM FOR LIBERAL ARTS GRADUATES

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research was to develop and determine the effectiveness of a workshop on Job-Searching Skills and Interview Techniques for students graduating from a College of Liberal Arts. It was the position of the authors that there are challenging, exciting and upwardly mobile job opportunities for liberal arts majors and that the primary obstacle to securing such employment may rest with the student himself and his lack of knowledge concerning employment opportunities and the methods of obtaining employment, rather than with the scarcity of such employment.

A training program was designed and implemented at the University of Lowell with a pilot group of liberal arts graduates in the Spring of 1983. Focus was given to job searching skills, resume writing and the process of interviewing; simulations and video-taped recordings were used as part of the program. Follow up interviews demonstrated that students can be trained in job-searching skills in a relatively short period of time and that such workshops are valued by the participants in terms of helping them to successfully attain employment.

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Introduction

In May 1983, the authors conducted a brief 2 day training program - workshop for graduates of the College of Liberal Arts at a large State University near the Boston area. The global objective of the program was to help the participants improve their abilities and skills in seeking and obtaining employment. The specific purposes of the program were the: (1) identification of potential work/career opportunities; (2) recognition of skills, talents and abilities; (3) familiarization with the process of the job interview; and (4) construction and modification of vitas and cover letters.
The 1983 workshop was the first of its kind to be offered at the University. Hopefully, facilities will be available to offer the program in 1984 with appropriate modifications and improvements. In subsequent sections of this paper the authors describe the program, report on its outcome, and discuss feedback from program participants with respect to their suggestions for future workshops.

Background

In the present era of high technology many parents, students, and even educators are questioning the value of a liberal arts education. Foes of liberal arts point to the problems some graduates of such

programs face when seeking employment compared to the relative ease in obtaining employment experienced by graduates of various professional, scientific, and/or computer oriented programs. It is the position of the authors, both of whom are faculty members of a College of Liberal Arts, that there are challenging, exciting, and upwardly mobile job opportunities for liberal arts majors and, more importantly, that the primary obstacle to securing such employment may rest with the student himself and his lack of knowledge of employment opportunities and appropriate job search strategies rather than the scarcity of such employment. In light of this position, the workshop was designed to focus on the following: (1) a belief that jobs do exist, (2) an understanding of how to begin searching, locating and obtaining these jobs, and (3) an awareness of the fact that the presentation of self with respect to cover letters, vitas and finally the interview itself is crucial to a successful job search process. In fact, it is the contention of the authors that first impressions are extremely important in the job search process and that the individual who possesses a well organized and polished vita, a firm handshake, and the knowledge and ability to confidently look the interviewer in the eye will clearly have the advantage over his competitors (all other factors being relatively equal).

Description of the Program

Participants The participants for the training program-workshop were

students graduating in the Spring of 1983 from the College of Liberal Arts at the University of Lowell. The University of Lowell is a large public, state funded university located approximately twenty miles Northwest of Boston. The University is composed of seven undergraduate colleges, a school of graduate studies, and evening and continuing education programs. There are currently about 10,000 students at the University of Lowell and of these approximately 1,700 students are enrolled in academic majors in the College of Liberal Arts.

In the beginning of May 1983 notices were placed in the mailboxes of all graduating seniors in the College of Liberal Arts, advising them of the free training program. During the second week of May, one of the authors met with students who had expressed an interest in the program and explained to them the program in greater detail. After this meeting, four students chose to participate in the workshop. (It should be pointed out that scheduling conflicts prevented many students from participating in the workshop even though they had expressed an interest in it).

Objectives

The objectives of the training program - workshop in employment research strategies were as follows:

(1) To help students understand how to prepare a professional vita, cover letter, and follow up letter; and, by working with students to help them to prepare each of these materials before the end of the workshop.

(3) To help students recognize their existing skills, talents, and the potential that these hold for possible employment.

(4) To improve students' presentation of self by examining and focusing on their details of dress, appearance and demeanor. The principal device used to achieve this goal was the simulation and videotaping of job interviews which were played back and discussed with the students during the workshop sessions.

Outline of Workshop Activities

Each participant was asked to bring a professional vita to the opening session of training program and to come dressed as he would for a job interview.

DAY 1 9:00 a.m. - 1:00 p.m.

Each of the participants was greeted at the door by one of the authors, who shook hands with him and then asked him to please take a seat, explaining that someone would be with him shortly. Simultaneously, the other author was engaged in video-taping the introductory exchange. When all of the participants had arrived and were seated, the program progressed to an individual and group discussion of each participants' vita and cover letter as well as suggestions for the improvement of these materials. In addition, the group discussed the importance of a cover letter as part of one's marketing strategy and of a follow up letter with respect to job inquiries and interviews. Several handouts were distributed to the participants; these materials addressed the topics of vitas, cover

letters, follow-up letters, job listings, and interviews with samples of each. Each participant was given a comprehensive manual entitled The 1983 College Placement Manual which lists and considers career opportunities for liberal arts graduates. Students were given the assignment to return the following day with an improved vita and cover letter for five actual jobs.

While all of the aforementioned aspects of the program were in progress, parts of the session were video-taped and recorded. The video-tapes were then played back to the group. In this regard, participants were given the opportunity to see themselves and examine their demeanor at the initial encounter with the authors, i.e., shaking hand and introducing themselves. They were also able to observe their behavior while engaged in a discussion with several other people. This experience appeared to be the most interesting for everyone. There was an extensive discussion of how each of the partiipants could improve and what postures and mannerisms were most appropriate for the setting of the job interview. Participants then had the opportunity to "re do" their entrance and initial encounter with the authors. Video-tapes of this session component demonstrated the marked improvement in the participant's initial presentation of self to the interviewer.

DAY II 9:00 a.m. - 10:00

The same program procedure was followed on Day II as the students arrived at the training program - workshop, including video-taping of their entrance and introductory exchanges with the authors. The authors and participants first reviewed the cover letters and improved vitas, making any necessary modifications and additional suggestions where appropriate.

DAY II 10:00 a.m. - 1:00 p.m.

The remainder of the second day of the training program - workshop was spent on mock interviews. Each student was interviewed by one of the authors while the other students observed the exchanges and dynamics of the situation which was video-taped by the other author. Following the interview, the video-tape was replayed and discussed in terms of how the student could have improved his performance in the context of the interview. Each student participated in two mock interviews and subsequent group discussions. The program officially terminated after all interview situations had been analyzed and discussed. The remainder of the time, however, was spent with students on an individual basis, working with them to improve the final drafts of their vitas and cover and follow up letters.

Program Evaluation

An evaluation of the training program - workshop and its subsequent impact upon the actual attainment of employment by liberal arts graduates was employed via the interview method. Participants were asked to respond to a series of questions which assessed the training program - workshop in general and to provide suggestions and recommendations for future ones. As will be shown in subsequent sections of this paper, three of the four participants responded to items focusing on background employment information, the process of the job search and strategies used to gain employment, and components of the training program - workshop.

In general, the participants indicated that the training program - workshop was a positive and invaluable experience for them both personally and professionally. The positions of employment which had been attained were related to academic majors offered in the College of Liberal Arts at the University of Lowell. Both the job search process and the strategies used to acquire a position varied from individual to individual; however, all respondents indicated that their approach was derived and based upon the information presented in the two day training session. All were in agreement that the most valuable aspects of the program were the simulations and video-taped recordings of the interview process. Finally, several recommendations and suggestions were offered to support the continuance of the training program - workshop for graduates of liberal arts colleges.

A detailed presentation of the participants' response to and evaluation of the training program - workshop is highlighted in the remaining sections of this paper. The results of this follow up inquiry is presented according to the three major areas of assessment, namely, background employment information, search process and strategies, and overall program evaluation with itemized questions and individual participant responses.

WORKSHOP RESPONSES

I. Background Employment Information

A. Has participant successfully obtained job?

Catherine J.: Yes
Maurice D.: Yes
Clifford H.: Not yet; in process of hearing from prospective employer.

(1) Position/Title

Catherine J.: Manager of Picture Framing Store
Maurice D: Layout Artist in Graphic Department, Wang Laboratories
Clifford H: Being considered for position as CadCam Designer

(2) Related to Academic Major

Catherine J: Yes
Maurice D.: Yes, related to academic minor
Clifford H: Yes, it will be if attained

B. Did the workshop help you to get this position/job?

(1) If so, in what way? Describe.

Catherine J.: The workshop was extremely helpful to me obtaining this position. In particular, I learned how to express myself more clearly in both verbal and non-verbal ways. These learning acquisitions were based on the video-taped sessions and simulated interview experiences we were exposed to during the workshop. It was extremely helpful for me to observe the other participants as well as myself in the simulated interview sessions as both interviewer and interviewee and to listen to the comments and criticisms offered by participants towards my performance in general.

Maurice D: For me, the workshop was extremely valuable in providing me with self-confidence and a good sense of presentation of self before other individuals. The video-recordings, simulated exercises and feedback sessions concerning my behavior in the job interview from the workshop leaders and participants helped me to build self confidence and assertiveness skills.

C. Evaluation of Elements of Workshop:

(1) Cover Letter:

A. Did you develop a cover letter vis-a-vis samples provided in the workshop?

Catherine J: yes

Maurice D: no; cover letters were not submitted with my resume
Clifford H: yes

B. Was cover letter revised? How many times?

Catherine J: no
Maurice D: none used
Clifford H: yes; cover letters have been revised according to the positions I apply for

(2) Resume:

A. Did you develop your resume more fully as a result of the workshop?

Catherine J.: Yes, I used the materials disseminated in the workshop
Maurice D.: Yes, I revised my resume per the recommendations of the workshop leaders and enlarged upon the areas with missing or insufficient information.
Clifford H.: Yes, I continue to use the information given to us in the workshop

B. Did your resume help you to obtain the job?

Catherine J.: Yes, I think so.
Maurice D.: Yes, it clarified points for the employer.
Clifford H.: I don't know yet.

C. Were important elements included?

Catherine J.: Yes
Maurice D.: Yes
Clifford H. Yes

(3) Interviews

A. Did you have an interview(s)?

Catherine J.: Yes, I participated in several different interviews and with three different companies.
Maurice D.: Yes, I had three interviews for the position which I now hold. The first interview was a preliminary one and the two subsequent ones were conducted with two individuals.
Clifford H.: Yes, I had one interview for the position I am now seeking.

B. Total number of interviews:

Catherine J.: One for my present position
Maurice D.: Three
Clifford H.: One

C. How helpful was the simulated interview in preparing you for the actual one? Describe.

Catherine J.: Very helpful; it made me more cognizant of what I would encounter in a real interview situation and how I present myself in front of other individuals.

Maurice D.: Yes, it gave me the courage to take the initiative and meet with company individuals prior to the actual job posting. The person with whom I met is my current supervisor and I believe that it was through this exchange that I was able to obtain the position.

Clifford H.: Extremely helpful; questions asked in this session were realistic ones. In fact, every question that was posed to me in the simulated interview was asked in the actual interview. For example, strong and weak points were addressed, plans for the future, etc. It was excellent preparation for the real interview.

D. Based on the workshop's video-taped interview, did you modify the way in which you presented yourself in the actual interview. Explain.

Catherine J.: I became more aware of my stronger points or assets and stressed those in the real interview situtation rather than weak points. In addition, the tapes helped me to change my appearance and style of self presentation in a positive way.

Maurice D.: Yes, I felt more confident and tactful as a result of the experience. I also believe I was less anxious when meeting with interviewers and discussing my qualifications.

Clifford H.: Yes; I found myself following the recommendations of the workshop leaders and participants and made certain that I did not speak too softly and quickly. I felt more confident and assertive in the actual interview.

II. Search Process and Strategies Used (List)

Catherine J.:
- Telephone Inquiries and Interviews
- Newspaper Advertisements
- Used Contacts in the field
- Participated in Interviews
- Offered Job and Accepted Position

Maurice D.:
- Left resume with company officials
- Telephoned for meeting with respective department
- Met with current supervisor even though position was not available
- Supervisor called to inform me of opening
- Participated in 3 interviews
- Offered job and accepted position
- Process took about one (1) month

Clifford H.:
- Received notice of position by a friend working at the company
- Submitted resume

Participated in 1 interview
Currently conducting follow-up status of application

III. Program Evaluation

A. Indicate the most helpful part of the program. Exnlain.

Catherine J.: Video-tapes and the ideas acquired from the workshop leaders and participants. Criticism concerning my behavior and performance in the entire job search process was extremely useful to me.

Maurice D.: Video-taped interviews and feedback from others.

Clifford H.: Interview experience in general; I gained alot by seeing myself as well as the other participants who engaged in the exercise. The development of a resume was also helpful.

B. Indicate the least helpful part of the program. Explain.

Catherine J.: The time in which it was offered, especially the morning hours since it conflicted with a previous job I held.

Maurice D.: The development of a resume and cover letter since I had already designed one prior to the workshop.

Clifford H.: None; it was very good.

C. Evaluation of content and structure (e.g., time, length, format)

Catherine J.: Fine; nothing should be changed.
Maurice D.: Excellent; no criticisms
Clifford H.: Very good as it stands

D. Recommendations for future workshops:

Catherine J.: Students should come into the workshop with a resume in hand and reading assignments read. Consideration might be given to the time of year offered (May); perhaps, it should be offered earlier in the semester. This workshop is very helpful to students; I encourage you to continue to offer this to seniors. The leaders might call upon the student newspapers' photographer and reported to write a feature story about it and publicize the time of offering on a bi-monthly basis beginning in January.

Maurice D.: It might be advantageous to offer the workshop earlier in the semester. You might eliminate the component concerning the investigation of companies prior to interviews; this is a very difficult task to accomplish.

Clifford H.: Address the different ways in which a person might start the job hunt process; e.g., ways of conducting a search, newspaper advertisments and the like. How does one proceed would be useful to highlight in the program.

Conclusions

This paper has identified some major features of a workshop on training liberal arts graduates in employment research strategies and its impact on their success in attaining employment. Techniques in resume and letter writing, interview skills, and presentation of self in the job search process constituted a major portion of the workshop. Simulations and video-taped recordings of mock interview sessions as well as critical assessments of the participants' behavior in these situations played another major role in the program. A program evaluation, based on the interview method, indicated that the workshop was positively assessed by the participants. Graduates from Colleges of Liberal Arts do successfully locate and attain positions of employment related to their liberal arts major and background and do believe that a training program such as the one described serves to facilitate the search process. We hope that persons concerned with the saleability of liberal arts majors will consider the significance and value of training programs - workshops that address and facilitate employment strategies and skills for liberal arts graduates.

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